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## Introduction

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# INTRODUCTION

## Towards a functional perspective on journalism's role and relevance

*Marcel Broersma and Chris Peters*

Notions of life and death hold a prominent place in our metaphorical repertoires. As oppositional pairs go, there are few more stark and palpable, and this is probably why it's not only tempting but also persuasive to present the claim for journalism's worth in similar terms. If journalism is indeed the 'lifeblood of democracy' and all this implies, societies with an unhealthy press are evidently at risk. Pleas for solutions to improve journalism's conditions therefore tend to go hand in hand with doomsday scenarios about the broader losses for society if journalism-as-we-know-it should cease to exist. While such thinking may not always be put in austere terms, it is nonetheless a constitutive part of the discourse that surrounds journalism as well as the basis for many concerns over its future.

Journalism has long and successfully claimed to be 'the primary sense-making practice of modernity' (Hartley, 1996, p. 12). While it has always been one sense-making practice among many interrelated others, its value to society has been and still is widely acknowledged, not least by journalists, politicians, and journalism scholars. In the course of its modernist professional project, journalism carved out a specific place and function in democratic societies, fulfilling distinctive needs for citizens. This period, which took hold over the course of the twentieth century in much of the Western world, witnessed the rise of the mass press as well as the appearance of many of the paradigmatic claims about journalism's value and necessity (Broersma, 2007), which still hold sway to this day. This was a time of grand theories and strong normative stances, and for the most part, such claims seemed laudable and worth striving towards, albeit challenging to realize in practice.

While admittedly fairly complicated and nuanced, it nonetheless remains that a key characteristic of this period was the appearance of durability and predictability when it came to many social institutions, forms of and approaches to

knowledge (Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994), including those associated with journalism. However, as we move beyond modernity – late, reflexive, liquid, post- or otherwise – this stability is increasingly challenged. Public trust and reliance on the ‘expert’ forms and institutions that modernity helped create is now continually being re-assessed as people turn to emerging alternatives. In addition, the development of personal media devices, 4G telecommunications, and Web 1.0, 2.0 and (soon) 3.0 fundamentally disrupt previous patterns of information provision and circulation. With this backdrop, it is no wonder that the tenor of post-millennial discussions about the news industry has been characterized by an emphasis on change. Technological advancement and economic models are the typical culprits identified in terms of how they are disrupting journalism practice and the news, and impacting journalism’s ability – both positively and negatively – to deliver on its historical promises.

## From rethinking to rethinking again

As we argued in the introduction to *Rethinking Journalism*, which can be seen as a precursor to this collection, such changes are not merely incremental or simply discursive; they are structural and strike journalism at its core. Whereas modernist discourses tend to anticipate change in terms of adaptation and subsequent progression, this now seems increasingly untenable (Broersma and Peters, 2013). Two intertwined trends have profoundly disturbed the relationship between journalism and its publics, who are, of course, also its customers. The de-industrialization of information and de-ritualization of audiences in contemporary digital media environments challenge not only what news is, but also what it can be.

In this sense, the rise of the mass press in modernity was less about the inherent value of its sense-making properties as it was a result of the logic of industrialization being brought to information. The ‘trick’ of journalism’s business model was getting mass audiences to pay for a product (through their presence as consumers for advertisers, members of the tax and licence fee-paying public, or actively via subscriptions), which often contained little information they needed and which they couldn’t see in advance. However, the product as a whole, ‘the news’, performed a host of worthwhile informative and social functions that became part and parcel of daily life. It did everything from conveying information about current affairs, social issues, weather reports, and where to find jobs and housing to providing topics for conversation, putting one in touch with one’s community, and structuring and giving meaning to everyday life. In short, journalism connected audiences within democratic market societies. With the decline of mass media monopolies, this industrial logic of journalism seems to be outdated, its core functions for people gradually eroded (Broersma and Peters, 2013).

Whereas the authors in the previous collection (Peters and Broersma, 2013) offered profound insights into what this means for longstanding ideals surrounding trust, participation and engagement with the news, this book, comprised of an almost entirely different line-up of communication, media and journalism studies

scholars, refocuses discussions more closely on the object itself. When we thought up the focus of this volume, we invited the authors, somewhat provocatively, to move beyond the established rhetoric in scholarship and journalism practice. For all its seeming self-evidence, how much affinity does this talk share with the concrete functions journalism performs, or could perform, in the digital age? And what about journalism as a cultural form itself? Is there a singular journalism that has a well-defined task in democracy and society? Specifically, we challenged the contributors to critically reconsider not only journalism's essential social role but also its associated public relevance. Journalism studies as a field of media and communication research is a child of journalism itself; as a result, changes are typically looked at from journalism's point of view. This is an understandable focus given that our academic business is analysing journalism and the natural extension of this is that any perceived disruption within the object itself is cause for our attention. However, allowing journalism practice and the industry to act almost as a centripetal force for our scholarship leads to a somewhat predictable approach.

Specifically, it seems as though when it comes to *arguing for the value of journalism*, many of us studying the news, and journalists and the public themselves too for that matter, look back to familiar rhetoric – the aforementioned grand normative theories or updated editions thereof – to do so (Peters, 2015). At the same time, inherent to the past decade and a half of scholarship about journalism has been a recognition that the affinity between the rhetorical claims of journalism and its ability to realize these are growing apart. When it comes to *accounting for change in the industry*, however, the focus typically shifts to technological advancements and their possible implications. A brief glance at recent international academic conferences, prominent reports, journals shaping the field and book titles (including arguably this one) illustrates this tendency toward being a future-focused, one might even say obsessed, discipline. The obvious conclusion, but one that is hardly ever explicitly drawn given the persistence of the dominant rhetoric underlying the doxa of the field, might be that many of the theoretical frameworks in use no longer (completely) match the empirical studies into 'new' journalistic practice they aim to conceptualize. Although we acknowledge that the normative underpinnings of journalism and journalism studies are worthwhile, we have to conclude (somewhat gloomily) that it is challenging for historical propositions and forward-based technological forecasting to align.

Over the last couple of years, we have continued to wonder whether or not rephrasing familiar rationales about the purpose of news was serving to bring journalism studies forward. If our common sentiment is a wish that journalism in some form remains sustainable and worthwhile, how then might we better approach scholarship and our object of study to help enable this viability? While we suspect at least some authors in this collection and readers may disagree with our proposal, the remainder of this introductory chapter takes up these familiar discussions to try to begin a conversation anew. Our thinking in this respect is guided by a common sentiment prevalent throughout the chapters, as well as the afterwords, which is that most authors acknowledge that something meaningful is changing in journalism,

but are still grappling over whether this necessitates updating previous concepts and paradigms to gain explanatory purchase over these changes or if entirely new vocabularies and approaches are needed.

Inspired by them, we take up the implicit challenge we read contained within these works, namely to begin to initiate a way forward for understanding and analysing journalism's contemporary status in a manner that encompasses historical premises, current practices and future change. We begin by discussing the first part of this collection's subtitle, namely journalism's societal role and relevance, to critically interrogate the stability of our traditional understandings of its purpose. While many of these familiar notions may have made some sense in journalism's formative period, we question the extent to which they hold up now. This brings us to the next section, which parallels the latter portion of the subtitle. In it we look to the place of journalism within a broader digital informational ecology to see how technological development impacts our scholarship. We argue that this metaphor alerts us to the competitive realities of the knowledge economy and helps to de-centre journalism without slipping into relativistic scholarship. In the final section, the chapter introduces the idea of a functional approach to studying the news, arguing that it offers the possibility of taking both latent and manifest functions of contemporary journalism and folding these into a relational framework grounded in everyday life. We hope it can offer a nuanced, substantiated and situational analytical lens that helps us to avoid all-or-nothing pronouncements on what journalism has been and can be by encompassing multiple temporal prisms. Only then can we understand what journalism 'is'.

## Societal role and relevance

Constituting a collection centred around the societal role and relevance of journalism might seem somewhat self-evident in light of the dominant emphases in journalism studies scholarship. Crisis talk (Zelizer, 2015), the prominence of a democratic paradigm when conceptualizing and evaluating journalism (Joseph, 2013), and the aforementioned tendency toward forward-looking scholarship intersect to form a persuasive nexus for justifying the necessity of news as well as formulating longstanding normative arguments for the value of journalism. The gravitational pull created by such thinking is hard to escape and for academics orbiting journalism as an object of study, the tendency to be pulled in is understandable. It may, in fact, be definitional. The rise of journalism studies as a prominent sub-field of media and communications research has paralleled – one might even say been premised on – the 'decline', in many ways, of its definitional object of study. In such a climate, the idea of change, and especially forward-looking change, gains almost paradigmatic status. The result is a scholarly discipline whose very existence, paradoxically, is oftentimes tied to an object many fear is disappearing for good or changing beyond recognition.

Such thinking is not unique to academics. Journalists and industry observers are similarly forthcoming with pronouncements on the societal 'need' for thorough

and independent journalism, and it is frightfully easy to find panels, think tanks and public declarations in recent years from within the industry stating that many trends of the digital era are taking news in a transformative direction (e.g. Kirkland, 2014; Cassidy, 2015). The technological tools bequeathed to audiences allow participation, interaction, crowdsourcing and many other seemingly beneficial endeavours, but searching questions remain about fragmentation, information overload and economic models to underwrite the news. As with the academic tendency above, when asked why this all matters, it is easy to fall back on familiar refrains which operate at a macro level. Much of the modernist project of journalism was founded around the premise and indeed promise of providing information to the masses and being legally (if not constitutionally) fundamental to democracy because of this. In short, the unifying function of mass media was implied if not strived for, and by advancing the illusion of trying to be everything for everyone, journalism's discourse became tied to a number of assumptions about its societal role and relevance that were not only advanced but also codified in law, reflected in news organizations' mottos and advertising slogans, and gradually internalized as central to public discourse around the profession.

These ideas are as familiar as they are potentially determinative: information source, watchdog, public representative, mediator for political actors and similar notions (for useful overviews, see Schudson, 2008; McNair, 2012). Despite the fact that the rhetorical functions by which we discuss the necessity of news might not have ever been taken up as we might think (or wish), and notwithstanding our understanding that these metanarratives tend towards overgeneralization, they nonetheless offer succour, as the absence of these things, we assume, is problematic. However, we benefit from critically interrogating such assumptions. For instance, the changing digital landscape and participatory options available to audiences challenge our understanding and invocation of the grand normative theories that have defined journalism (Peters and Witschge, 2015). This in turn relates to a reconfiguration of collective versus individualized understandings of its professional and democratic functions. In terms of these latter two ideas, we can further query how the unrelenting emphasis on democracy (Zelizer, 2013), or for that matter the essential claim of professionalism itself (Donsbach, 2014), frame enquiries around familiar lenses which may blind us from seeing what journalism is being, or has become, in a new media environment. Many other fruitful possibilities exist – from considering journalism in terms of its (shifting) boundaries (Carlson and Lewis, 2015) or (reconfigured) gatekeeping practices (Vos and Heinderyckx, 2015) – to see whether we can adapt 'old' paradigms to continue to explain the role of news and its institutional status or whether we need completely new approaches to understand its societal position in the digital era.

As we embark on such conceptual journeys, it is worth sounding a slight note of caution. It seems increasingly evident to us that when we look to many intended functions or desirable social outcomes of journalism, the construction of these appears centred on cultural expectations more than everyday consequences. Such normative thinking is both ubiquitous and hard to test empirically, and for these

reasons leads to stirring soundbites, philosophies and mission statements, but not necessarily to robust, testable conceptualizations. This miscasting impacts the utility of both public- and commercial-based understandings of journalism's contemporary purpose and our certainty over its need. In this respect, it is important to keep in mind that many of our hopes for journalism are founded on a public ethos that may bear little affinity to actual collective practices and prerequisites. This is unlike, say, infrastructure or education – more conventional public goods in the sense that they produce positive externalities that, albeit difficult to measure, are services everyone will need to make use of at some point. For these, relevance is built into the core of the object itself (we likely won't stop needing and using roads and schools anytime soon, and trying to think of widespread alternatives emerging to replace them is tricky at best).

However, the same cannot be said for journalism, and many have already moved on, if they were there in the first place. In addition, it is questionable whether journalism has ever been financially supported to the extent needed to fulfil the public services it claims to perform. Moreover, when we go beyond the definition of the object itself and its position in the broader field of cultural knowledge production, we get to relevance. But here too we find challenges. For instance, the investigative watchdog function sounds hard to replace, but whistleblowers and auditors are not in short supply and perform many similar societal roles. Similarly, public, commercial and non-governmental organizations as well as citizens' groups continue to find meaningful ways to circumvent journalism to distribute their message, meaning that the mediating, informational and representational functions served by news, while still useful, are no longer exclusive. Moving away from politics and current affairs (i.e. the purview of traditional 'hard' news), it is also easy to see how the 'softer' functions of journalism are being even more rapidly usurped, often by private enterprises better positioned to thrive in a new informational ecology where specialization abounds. This is evident for things like classified ads, travel advice, film and arts reviews, sports and the like.

The point isn't that such shifts aren't potentially problematic and worrisome, and that the societal consequences aren't meaningful – they are. Nor are we claiming such changes happen overnight; stability has a role to play when it comes to the role and relevance of journalism, discursively and materially through long-established practices, artefacts, institutional structures and legal texts which still exist and undoubtedly have tangible impacts going forth. In this respect, perhaps change is the right idea but the wrong emphasis. Including historical, contemporary and future perspectives together shifts the focus from forward-looking, discrete change to the pace and particularities of structural transformations. In this light, the caveat noted above about conceptualizing relevance based on normative expectations simply alerts us to the possibility that familiar discourses may be quite disconnected from what's happening on the ground. In this respect, if we want to advance persuasive claims for journalism's societal value or, equally pressingly, figure out robust funding models going forth, looking to the media environment may prove a fruitful starting point. For if we expect journalism's potentialities to align with its lived everyday



functions, viewing it as one of many knowledge producers in a broader informational ecology may prove a more accurate representation of its possible worth than the traditional aspirations assigned to the Fourth Estate.

## Informational ecology

With its well-known historical discourse and associated assumptions, trying to come to grips with what journalism 'is' becomes understandably Janus-faced. The historically grounded rhetoric discussed in the previous section typically moulds discussions around purpose and thus tends towards the familiar. Conversely, attempts to account for change mainly tend towards the manifest technological developments of the current digital era and their economic consequences; when practices are a focal point, the emphasis naturally shifts to emergence rather than stasis. Technological change undoubtedly shapes how journalism is produced, the forms it takes, its distribution and consumption, so it would be odd if academics didn't emphasize these aspects when 'doing' what is accurately and increasingly – although somewhat superfluously – called digital journalism studies (see Franklin and Eldridge II, 2016; Witschge et al., 2016). This particular stress is understandable as, much like journalists chasing a scoop, the pressure to 'innovate' in scholarship is inherently forward looking. This tendency is reinforced by funding agencies that demand that academics predict the prosed societal worth of a project before it is conducted, institutions that brand around revolutionary research and future-proof degree programs, and journals constantly in search for the next cutting-edge topic. This is not problematic per se, as the opposite of innovation is stagnation, which is an undesirable goal for a discipline. However, this focus on technological change and its implications can become potentially problematic if it is employed too narrowly or in isolation.

A central observation in the area of media ecology is that technologies tend to be perceived as most disruptive at the outset, before gradually becoming expedient and increasingly unnoticed devices in everyday life through processes of rationalization (Meyrowitz, 1985). In this regard, despite being a metaphor drawn from science, its understanding is intensely cultural, pointing us towards the forces of change in terms of technological emergence and subsequent integration, control and habituation. This emphasis is crucial, for it moves us away from focusing on individual technological developments to instead consider how they interact culturally, institutionally and – most importantly – relationally. This is easy to lose sight of, as the pace of change in the media ecology has been exceptionally rapid these past couple of decades, which means that disruption can appear to be constant.

The technologically inspired foci of a decade's worth of journalism studies scholarship points to a news ecosystem that barely comes to grip with one technology, if it does at all, before the next appears. We have seen a constant flow of scholarship focusing on the newest technological features with accompanying rising practices, such as blogs, chat, online news, produsage, citizen journalism, user-generated content, mobile media, convergence, audience participation, social media, transmedia, networks, crowdsourcing, cross-media, click rates, big data, algorithmic journalism



and on and on. Trying to piece this together becomes overwhelming and it is quite reasonable that many try to maintain focus amidst all of this change by considering specific impacts within the walls of what we might still call journalism practice. This is a reasonable limitation but limiting it is, nonetheless.

The concept of ecology as a metaphor to explain the interconnection of different media environments is not accidental and leads to a number of useful observations. For one, ecologies are interdependent and relational. Shifts at one level are (potentially) far-reaching, if gradually felt. What started as an email distribution list to inform friends of local events in San Francisco in 1995 and became a web-based service a year later foretold the demise of the classified ad as a secure source of revenue. Craigslist (now active in 70 countries) and equivalent web services worldwide are evidently part of the same informational ecology as news organizations, and while this may not have been obvious in 1995, it quickly became so. Media archaeologists would undoubtedly be able to trace the first ripple in the pond even more precisely in terms of the history of necessary technological development.

While it is but one example, it is a useful one to make the point – if we only focus on how technology impacts journalistic practice and texts rather than communicative flows and informational cultures more broadly, we may be caught unawares. It also raises another key insight. While some dislike the ecological metaphor as they feel it implies a system that strives for homeostasis, we feel this is an odd interpretation. Ecologies, while potentially beautiful from far away, are far more like a Hobbesian worldview when one looks closely, and the lives of individual organisms within them can certainly be nasty, brutish and short. Similarly, seemingly small changes on a micro level (a mutated virus or different bacterial strand, the decline of krill in the Antarctic) can wipe out entire populations. Species become extinct. Polluted areas don't necessarily grow back. While we're not trying to fall into doomsday 'crisis speak' by invoking this metaphor, we also don't want to run the risk of falling into what amounts to informational climate change denial by ignoring ecological shifts.

In this regard, we have sympathy with the growing chorus of media scholars who warn against taking a media-centric approach to scholarship (see Morley, 2009; Couldry, 2012), as this surely alerts us to being receptive to influences outside what we might consider our traditional object of study. Even when journalism studies has taken an ecological approach, it tends to focus on journalistic production (who are the new players in the ecology and how do they relate to the established agents?) and news texts (what new features are facilitated by new technology to distribute information and tell stories?). But paradoxically, when we want to understand the structural changes in journalism, we have to zoom out and study it as only one phenomenon in the informational ecology among many others that are just as meaningful. In this regard, what we are curious about in terms of journalism studies is trying to figure out what makes for a robust organism. How are the functions that journalism traditionally has for people now being fulfilled and to what extent does journalism-as-we-know-it play a part in this? How could journalism adapt

and transform now that tasks and functions are redistributed? In a cut-throat media ecology, what survives and adapts are things which fulfil a well-described, well-defined, well-defended position within it.<sup>1</sup>

## A functional perspective

If we want to understand how and why journalism's position in the informational ecology is changing, we should look not at what it could or should do *to* people, but what it does *for* them instead. Considering the role and relevance of journalism in a digital era accordingly means looking to its ongoing status in everyday life and, in this regard, the functions it provides for people within the broader informational ecology. This implies that we should not depart, either explicitly or tacitly, from grand normative theories that by definition mould journalism into a predefined democratic framework, but take a bottom-up approach instead. Starting from daily practices, rituals, routines and habits allows us to carefully examine which functions journalism (still) fulfils in people's daily lives and what practices it intersects with (if it does). This is necessary to tease out what people's 'needs' are and to critically interrogate how journalism 'fits' – or could fit – within. Contrasting this with what different media offer allows us to analyse which functions are complimented by journalism and which are fulfilled better by alternatives, and are thus either already being done or taken over by other players. It may also alert us to what functions are being served poorly, or not at all, which journalism might exploit. Stretching the point to what might seem its most commercial interpretation, although one equally applicable to its public service mandate we would argue, it might even encourage thinking of how to tender a worthwhile function even when people cannot yet clearly articulate such a want or need. This dialectics of confronting manifest and latent needs with supply is especially challenging for journalism studies (and might actually be an important reason for its focus on production and content) because, as Bird (2011, p. 490) argues, 'when one moves away from definitions of news that are producer oriented, and begins with the consumer, the very understanding of what constitutes news begins to blur, thus making it harder to conceptualize the relationship between news and audience'. In other words, when one starts with the informational needs of users and later 're-centres' media and journalism to say something meaningful about them, doing research might become almost as complicated and confusing as the current transformations in the informational ecology.

But if we want to understand why in an ecology some species come up and blossom while others face extinction, we cannot study journalism in isolation. We have to think relationally. This links up to a major trend we've previously signalled, namely the corruption of the industrial logic that traditionally guided journalism both economically and organizationally as the former mass media paradigm is slowly but surely being complemented and maybe even replaced by a networked paradigm of communication (Broersma and Peters, 2013). Whereas media institutions in the past had a monopoly on the distribution of current information in the broadest sense, ranging from breaking news to the weather report and next week's

sales, the power and capacities to fulfil these informational needs have been or are being redistributed to a range of new institutions and individual agents, whether they define themselves as journalists, information workers, product managers, citizens or consumers. Contemporary informational flows mean we are now just as likely to get updates through friends, social media or directly from weather companies, department stores, government agencies and the like than from journalism. Of course, we realize that interpersonal communication has always been around, that reliable information needs to be produced by someone before it can be curated and that established media organisations have strong positions. But these caveats aside, the 'old' mass media logic now undeniably interacts with a 'new' networked logic which challenges our understanding of traditional public functions afforded to journalism and 'the news'. In the current hybrid informational ecology, a broad range of agents 'create, tap, or steer information flows in ways that suit their goals and in ways that modify, enable, or disable others' agency, across and between a range of older and newer media settings' (Chadwick, 2013, p. 4).

Whereas both the business model and normative underpinnings of mass media presupposed that every medium and media organization fulfilled all functions for all people, we now observe a redistribution of tasks among multiple agents. On the production side, it has become hard if not impossible to monopolize and monetize the value chain as journalism has long been able to do: it produced the news, sold advertisements, printed or broadcasted the news product and distributed it among audiences. What we have observed in the past decade or so is that journalism's control over the value chain has been slipping. On the internet, news is now increasingly distributed through social platforms such as Facebook's 'Instant Articles' or Snapchat's 'Discover'. Advertisements are sold by specialized companies that are able to sell personalized desires of consumers in a split second to advertisers. News is now produced by a range of agents that might label themselves as journalistic or not, but still satisfy the information hunger of people. This points to the fact that the informational ecology is also a monetized, typically capital-based ecology in which the industrial logic of controlling the value chain has become increasingly obsolete for most news organizations and is unlikely to be regained.

On the consumption side, in the digital information ecology, users create their individual media repertoires in which different media are more easily interchanged for different purposes and in which the use of platforms is dependent on each other (Hasebrink and Domeyer, 2012). Accordingly, people have the opportunity to choose a supplier that best fulfils a specific need, or creates a new one, as well as to pay for a certain service that has a specific function in their daily life instead of buying the whole package. This means that players in the informational ecology have to be aware of what purpose they serve for people and how to cater these. What is the job-to-be-done, to frame it in the jargon of disruptive innovation (Christensen, Skok and Allworth, 2012)? Traditionally, journalism had the luxury of not having to think about this and, when forced, unfortunately wasn't particularly good at it either. Partly, this is because key to journalism's modernist professional project is

its normative framework that centres around the concept of independence. It postulates that journalism should not only be independent from politics and business, but – especially when it comes to ‘quality’ journalism – also from its audience. The conception of the ‘public’ as a monolithic and abstract category has placed users effectively at a safe distance. In the trustee model, professional journalists decide what citizens need to know to be able to function in democracy. So while people are certainly invoked, it is but indirectly. Conversely, when journalism reaches out to the hearts and underbellies of individuals, such as in the case of tabloid journalism, the issue whether or not this is still journalism or mere entertainment is quickly raised. All to say, time and again we are reminded that journalism’s discourse is less functional than it is functionalist.

### ***A functional rather than functionalist perspective***

At this point, it is worth addressing a potential misinterpretation of our argument. Putting forth the idea of a ‘functional’ perspective likely raises eyebrows, sure as it is to evoke the ghosts of functionalism. Similarly, aligning a functional approach so closely with an interpretation of the digital media landscape as ecology has echoes of functionalism’s tendency towards modelling a positivist social science. Perhaps the idea of ‘function’ in the humanities and social sciences has been irrevocably tarred by its apparent semantic association with functionalism. Nonetheless, we feel the positives gained from deploying it in a bottom-up articulation, as we propose here, is well worth the risk of trying to re-appropriate the term. Moreover, when we think through what a functionalist interpretation of media actually entails, it quickly becomes clear that this is already dangerously close to what we have been critiquing from the outset and what is frequently done when discussing journalism – in essence, falling back on familiar claims to define its societal role and relevance.

As it pertains to communication and journalism scholarship, functionalism offers a theory that tries to explain the role of media in society in terms of societal and private needs. It emphasizes both the importance and agency of media organizations, and asserts that journalism should contribute to the common good of a healthy and sustainable society. Although disregarded for both its conservative character preserving the societal status quo and its inadequacy to go beyond the descriptive and commonsensical, functionalism still ‘offers a language for discussing the relations between mass media and society and a set of concepts that have proved hard to replace’ (McQuail, 2010, p. 98). Indeed, the functions that are attributed to media, news and journalism in functionalism will sound familiar to many precisely because these have been conceptualized in close relation to the normative rhetoric of the profession. Journalism monitors events and developments to provide relevant news and information to foster an informed citizenship. It is a watchdog or Fourth Estate which as an instrument of surveillance controls and corrects the powerful in society. It offers a podium on which citizens can voice their opinions and thus fosters public debate. It advocates the interest of certain groups in society. And, added

to the list more or less unwillingly because it aligns so poorly with the normative expectations of journalism, it entertains the people.

Although we acknowledge that functionalism might be useful on the rhetorical level and might even be hard to escape, we do wonder if it resonates (and has ever resonated) or lives up to the possible interrelated functions of news in the everyday lives of people. We argue that we cannot explain social institutions by the effects they are said to have post hoc. To understand changes in journalism and anticipate a possible future for it, we should study functions at the micro level without lapsing into functionalism and its predefined, top-down conceptions. In other words, if we want to understand which functions news and information have in the daily lives of people, and consequently which suppliers fulfil these, we have to start from everyday practices, habits, routines and experiences of users. How is news integrated in the banal and ever-changing sequences of social encounters, responsive behaviour and daily – and, as such, insignificant – events that translate into the patterns which structure our daily existence? We argue that we should first study these functions and then see if this can actually leverage up to macro-level perspectives and theorizing.

In this regard, uses and gratification theory which looks specifically at how media meet different individual needs might at first sight seem useful (cf. Ruggiero, 2000). However, there are two problems here. First, it is infused with the same normative rhetoric that is omnipresent in journalism research and predefines gratifications that build upon it. Second, it embarks from assumptions of rational behaviour and categories of manifest needs: it presupposes that people are clearly aware of their desires and how they can gratify these by anticipating the affordances of specific media. But in daily practice, media use seems in most cases not to be based on active and conscious choices. It is so intimately integrated with other social practices that it almost becomes a background activity instead of a deliberately performed act. Moreover, paradoxically, people use media they do not like while they do not use what they actually prefer (Swart, Peters and Broersma, 2016).

Thus finding issue with both functionalism and uses and gratifications theory, we argue that we need to embrace a cultural approach to study the redistribution of functions and tasks traditionally performed by journalism to get a grip on the changes in the informational ecology. This still happens too little, as Bird (2011, p. 491) has argued: ‘journalism scholars rarely tackle the reception of news in other than quantitative, text-response ways, and cultural studies scholars and anthropologists continue to focus primarily on entertainment genres’. When it comes to journalism, the ritual function of mass media has been emphasized: people have their own daily habits and routines for media consumption, and these might not be primarily geared towards the content of news, but are situated in other activities and needs. Historically, fixed moments of news consumption not only structured the day – whether it was the morning paper or the evening news broadcast – but also united individual people as a public that consumed the same news simultaneously, thus constructing a similar frame of reference (Carey, 1975; Anderson, 1983). However, now that news is available wherever and whenever users want it, a de-ritualization, and at the same time potentially a re-ritualization, of news use takes

place. We not only need to study which new news habits are emerging if we want to understand why journalism is suffering from a (potential) loss of functions and how it can anticipate this, but we must also develop a new conceptual vocabulary (or renovate old ones) to describe and conceptualize this.

In this regard, it might be useful to distinguish between manifest and latent functions that news media supply for people and how these functions are folded into everyday life. Interestingly, what would be a manifest function for one person could be a latent function for another, and vice versa. For example, a manifest function would be supplying relevant information that enables people to make sense of the world around them and engage in daily conversation and activities. Obviously this is the key function journalism claims to provide: it is the go-to place for an encompassing, and nowadays ongoing, update of what is happening in the world and how we should interpret that. However, when we start from the perspective of the user, things look different. When people are interested in something informationally specific, they will most probably go to a search engine. When it's less specific 'news' ~~one's~~ after, aggregation sites that curate local or topical news or organize content based on continuous, mostly hidden, feedback and information from the user are trying to push to the fore. In itself, these are dramatic changes, but even to focus on them risks overlooking what's happening. Increasingly (the) news is not something you go to or that comes to you, but a commodity that finds you in an often semi-personalized way through continuously refreshed social networks like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube or LinkedIn. The opportunity for each and every one to publish stripped journalism of one of its most important functions: gatekeeping. Nowadays it is not only news organizations that determine which topics and arguments enter and circulate in the public sphere. Recent developments show that 'non-journalistic' platforms increasingly try to keep the user on their own domain by offering content that loads quickly in users' timelines instead of referring them via links to the original news websites. This is problematic for most news organizations because nowadays, search and social generate the large majority of the traffic they need to fund their business.

When we move on to more latent functions, such as providing quick and convenient access to services, social networks and mobile apps have effectively invaded the informational ecology. Through partnerships with other companies, whether they offer opportunities for entertainment, shopping, personal services or social interaction, Facebook in particular has developed into the dominant channel for identifying oneself and logging in. Although at first sight this might seem trivial and unrelated to what journalism traditionally does, it pushes journalism to the periphery of the information ecology by, at least partly, stripping it from its referral function, while at the same time making it dependent on others. Most successful 'beasts' in the new information ecology have managed to capture, combine and marry different informational flows (comparing prices, reviewing products and services, providing maps and traffic updates, etc.) with different cultural functions (shopping, cooking, occupying leisure time, commuting and so forth), and then lever this influence to try to stabilize these correlations and build pathways to more permanent relationships.



When it comes to another latent function of journalism, structuring daily life through a range of usually materialized and embodied ritual practices, journalism even runs the risk of becoming obsolete. Waking up with radio news and sifting through the morning paper or watching a news show over breakfast are for older generations still rituals that contribute to their mental and social well-being. Although research is scarce, it suggests that they pay just as much for the experience as for the news itself (Bentley, 2001; Swart, Peters and Broersma, 2016). However, younger generations seem far less willing to pay for the news or to value this particular experience. They start the day with checking their smartphones in bed, doing a checking cycle of a few apps that are usually not primarily focused on news; it is hard for news organizations to infiltrate these cycles (Costera Meijer and Groot Kormelink, 2014). Social networks and messenger services in this sense serve their rituals better than previous media, or at least afford more control over this structuring and its associated meanings. In this regard, while we are not trying to join in the common chorus that laments journalism's disappearing youth demographic (often conservatively implying a lack of civic engagement), when we view such changes from a functional perspective, it does point at concerns for journalism's future that are foolhardy to ignore.

Our aim in this introduction is not to scrutinize the changes in the informational ecology by extensively examining the various functions journalism has. But we do hope that through these few examples we have illustrated that there might be a discrepancy between journalism's rhetoric and the tasks it fulfils in the daily lives of individuals and society at large. This does not imply an all-or-nothing approach. We can still find instances where classic democratic functions are fulfilled by journalists, news organizations and the news. But from a broader perspective, task allocations are changing in the informational ecology and, in many cases, journalism might be (permanently) displaced. To better understand the current and future societal role and public relevance of journalism, if any, we suggest that it is fruitful to study what journalism does *for* people, how this relates to their needs and what others in the informational ecology offer. This re-orientation of scholarship on what journalism *does* instead of what it *is* and *aspires to be* will hopefully change the way we pose questions – and will make for challenging but potentially more grounded research questions. It opens up the playing field of scholarship to a broader range of questions. Are there (still) such things of acts of journalism? And, if so, what are they? And who performs these acts for people? If journalism had to invent itself in the current timeframe, would it then be journalism?

## Conclusion

Introductions to collections such as these often have modernist expectations built into their form and structure; that is, they try to summarize and combine many strands from the chapters which comprise the book together. Instead, in the spirit of the collection, we've tried to sketch a way forward for understanding and analysing journalism's contemporary status in a manner that encompasses historical



premises, current practices and future change. The point we have tried to make is that journalism isn't there primarily for journalists or to serve the interest of media corporations. Nor is it to stagnate in well-intentioned, but in the face of change increasingly hard-to-achieve historical rhetoric of working for the common good and in the interest of the public. In the age of connectivity which allows people to redistribute tasks and functions that were traditionally part and parcel of journalism, this rhetoric falls short. If journalism isn't 'the primary sense-making practice' of society anymore and companies like Google, Facebook and many others have eroded journalism's claim to comprehensively serve the public, what is journalism still good for?

A functional perspective, as we envision it, urges journalism scholars to move away from news production and news texts. In a sense, it urges academics to de-centre journalism and to start at the other end: with the functions journalism fulfils or could fulfil in the daily lives of ordinary people. This implies a move away from the grand normative theories in which both research and the societal claims of journalism are usually framed. At the same time, any profession or individual organization needs a normative framework to legitimize its place in society and to communicate its use for people. Departing from a bottom-up approach that carefully situates the functions of journalism in lived experiences would allow both journalists and journalism scholars alike to develop a new vocabulary to understand – and potentially advocate – new frameworks to conceptualize the place of journalism and its role versus individuals and society at large.

The chapters in this volume set out to do so, but not necessarily in the way we have laid out in this introduction. The first part of the book focuses on the societal role of journalism and how we can rethink this in the light of the current transformations in the informational ecology. The six chapters in this part engage with questions of journalism's expertise, authority and filter function, how this relates to the grand normative frameworks of journalism's role in democracy, and our conceptual scaffolds for making sense of its performance and responsibilities. The second part asks if and how journalism can retain its public relevance. The authors argue that we should move beyond newsrooms, that entrepreneurship, reciprocity and caring for communities could be workable solutions, and point at the gaps between what journalism offers, how it talks about itself and what its public wants. The two afterwords frame the chapters in each part in a broader perspective, using the themes therein as inspiration for conceptual exploration and directions for future scholarship and research. First and foremost, the aim of *Rethinking Journalism Again* is to offer inspiration and new directions to reflect on how the societal role and public relevance of what we have come to call journalism are changing. How can we conceptualize journalism beyond modernity, taking into account its historical premises and current practices, while anticipating future change? Even if journalism-as-we-know-it would become inadequate and disappear, it is worthwhile trying to figure out how to hold on to what it has come to represent, to ensure the functions it fulfils for people and for society remain.

## Note

- 1 If ecology is not one's academic cup of tea, one might also sense resonances of Bourdieu's field theory in what we are outlining, in terms of taking a relational approach that looks to status and power via positions within the field and external forces from associated fields without.

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